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AUTHOR Minister, Kristina
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ABSTRACT

The "individual forming meaning with a text" is a private and fundamental semiotic process involving relationships among text, individual, and meaning. Prior to an individual's use of language for aesthetic purposes lies the presupposition of the aesthetic language act--that the individual approaches the text expecting to work and be rewarded. Developmental semiotic structures remain the semiotic means for all occasions of representation for personal conceptual growth and for communication. While ordinarily the mature language user's inner semiotic activity functions minimally, the pressures of certain rhetorical situations place special demands on individuals' interior semiosis. The hiatus between the ordinary use of language and the aesthetic use enables the perceiver to commence work on the text. Clues point in two directions to absent fictive attributes, vertically across both systems and horizontally in pace with the temporal progression of the fiction. (DF)

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"Semiotic Constituents of Literary Meaning"

position paper for
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Kristina Minister

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Although literature can be explained in terms of the public written and spoken semiotic systems that exist independently of specific texts and individual readers, these textual structures and performance conventions could not have evolved without the private and more fundamental semiotic process by which literature is known: the individual forming meaning with a text. This most fundamental process involving the relationships among text, individual and meaning is my subject, the process which reduces traditional distinctions between silent and oral reader, between audience and performer, to one basic category--perceiver, the process by which the written text or the performance of the text is either known by the individual consciousness or it is not known at all. After outlining the pragmatic conditions for experiencing the aesthetic use of language, I shall propose how the primary language system is so altered into the system we call literature that it enables the perceiver to infer a fiction, a proposal equally pertinent to the frequent use of aesthetic language in nonfictional discourse.

Prior to an individual's use of language for aesthetic purposes lies a presupposition which motivates and sustains the aesthetic language act. The individual approaches the literary text or the performance expecting to work. Prior experience has taught the perceiver that inferring a fiction demands labor[1] and that the consequences of productive effort are highly rewarding. We know

that some individuals shun the effort, some have not learned how to make the effort, that these two types, having learned to read, do not read to learn of hypothetical persons, places, and events. There are also persons who--no matter how speedily they silently may read, how proficiently they orally may render a syntactic copy of a text, or how effectively they may personally or technically perform--do not act upon the text; they work, but for other rewards. An indispensible constituent of the experience of literature, then, is the aesthetic contract that individuals make with themselves as they approach a text: "This is going to be difficult and most rewarding work."

The type of labor invested in knowing a fiction requires a long apprenticeship: childhood. From birth each of us has been engaged in sensorimotor activity, imitation, imaging, and play--all semiotic acts upon the chaos of unknown and unnamed phenomena. We labor to differentially shape the unknown and to integrate the new shapes into concepts labeled with words and organized by sentences. The intensity of the child's signification activities, particularly during the first two years, leaves no doubt that humans are committed to knowing the world by acting upon it. Our growth toward conceptual intelligence begins with immediate sensory input, proceeds by representative acts of imitation, imaging, and play, and finally--after inferring the speech of the adult community--conceptual intelligence is realized in language function. Phenomena that existed in other places and times and that never existed

can now be represented. The past and the future can now be present. Lying and storying are now possible.

After conceptual intelligence, language, and reflective thinking allow us to hold the world off at a distance, developmental semiotic structures are not discarded; this early sensorimotor intelligence, Piaget instructs, becomes the new "essential tool for perceptive activity and the indispensable intermediary between the perceptions and conceptual intelligence."[2] Developmental semiotic structures remain the lifespan semiotic means for all occasions of representation, both for personal conceptual growth and for communication with others, the sine qua non for interpreting the linguistic code. "Without some semiotic means," Piaget and Inhelder affirm, "it would be impossible to think at all."[3]

During ordinary applications of speaking and writing, the mature language user's inner semiotic activity functions minimally because pragmatic situations interpret speech acts and because we share our cultural life in our common linguistic, paralinguistic, and parakinesic codes, but the pressures of certain rhetorical situations place special demands upon individual's interior semiosis. If speakers or writers cannot find appropriate communal labels to clothe their private intentions, they often resort to the hypothetical mode of knowing fictions, asking perceivers to tap their own unlabeled experience to supplement the code. The speaker or writer of nonfictional discourse will ask perceivers to suspend the discursive language presupposition in favor of the hypothetical

presupposition, a temporary aesthetic contract with the speaker/writer which encourages perceivers to enact, and thus share, the speaker's/writer's intentions. Regardless of the purpose of the discourse, persuasion is at work during hypothetical enactment of a fiction. Most especially will one of the most sophisticated forms of play, the literary text, challenge the perceptions, intending a fiction that exists in its own space and time. We cannot know a fictive referent posed by a speaker or a fiction intended by a text unless we enact it, semiotically representing the code to ourselves. Not only is it going to be hard work; it is our own work. And when we speak, our work increases. All of the constituents of fictive meaning, then, are made possible and are formed by the individual's personal semiosis. We know that it is going to be hard work to utilize the linguistic code for a fiction of our own making.

How does a literary text so alter the primary language system that it enables the perceiver to work upon the fiction? No alteration is made upon the materials of the primary system, for literary texts consist of the same words and kinds of sentences that comprise the primary system. Unlike the other arts, literature has no medium of its own; it must share its medium with the primary language system. The answer, then, cannot be found in an examination of the materials of the primary language system.

We have considered how the hypothetical presupposition sets the expectation for a fiction. Now consider the dilemma of would-be

perceivers encountering a code that has been their own since the fourth year of life, a code signifying categories of meaning selected by the language community. The code yields common property concepts, concepts too poor to signify the rich experience of a fiction. I propose that it is this very hiatus between the ordinary use of language and the aesthetic use of language which enables the perceiver to commence work upon the text. Out of the polysemantic nature of language arises the ambiguity between the primary system and its aesthetic derivation, a tensive[4] ratio between the two language systems. Suspended in the hiatus of interlinguistic tension the perceiver turns back to the text, asking "What is missing?". From what is present in the signified common property attributes of meaning, the perceiver notices the absence of attributes. The code has been changed into a set of clues, clues which invite the perceiver to use what is known to make guesses about what is not known. Eco personifies this precipitating stage of perception, maintaining that the aesthetic text is "self-focusing: it directs the attention of the addressee primarily to <u>its own shape</u>."[5] The organization of the primary language system into the aesthetic system, then, rather than the materials of language offers a highly selected set of clues to a specific fiction.

If we view language in terms of its seriality and its derived aesthetic system as allographic,[6] comprised of art works which unroll fictions through time, then it can be seen that clues point in two directions to absent fictive attributes, "vertically" across

both systems and "horizontally" in pace with the temporal progression of the fiction. "Vertical" connections are possible when the "self-focusing" text compels the perceiver to search the clues for present attributes, i.e., common property values of words and sentences which could be used to hypothesize, to make an inference about unknown attributes. Consider the following poem by Donald Justice:

Love's Map

Your face more than others' faces
Maps the half-remembered places
I have come to while I slept--
Continents a dream had kept
Secret from all waking folk
Till to your face I awoke,
And remembered then the shore,
And the dark interior.[7]

The focal clue around which the poem revolves is face. Before we can interpret this novel use of such an ordinary word we need help. It comes in the form of more clues functioning as interpretants[8] for the focal clue. Maps comes to our aid first, but it functions unobtrusively, for it is but an expected verb for the subject face. We know that the ordinary meaning of face does not include attributes associated with the verb maps, but the grammar ties the two lexemes together enabling the perceiver to knit together disparate attributes from two concepts. Thus the grammar subtly but firmly orchestrates the perception of "vertical" links between the language and its aesthetic use. We make the tentative inference that here is a face that represents something. Our

tentative hypothesis, then, provides a vector of meaning which slices through both language and poem. Face . . . maps is a metaphor organized by a noun and its verb.[9]

Next we find a series of clues pointing to the territory, the places, that the face represents. This territory which the speaker partly remembers includes continents, a shore, and an interior. We perceive that this territory must represent the speaker's life experience. These successive clues are distributed throughout the text, clues which must be acted upon by imaging, or finding conceptual attributes, and probably some combination of both. These clues must be noted and collected together in order to make an inference about their intention; thus they function "horizontally" both by the seriality of the text and in phenomenological time. Places, we infer, refers to the speaker's life, a metaphoric journey that the speaker but partly understands. We must find, hold in memory, and interpret all the clues indicating what lies behind places. As we participate in the temporal movement the ordinary meanings of the text are not discarded; they continue to exert their presence in the form of the phenomenological background against which the fiction is played. "Horizontal" tension thus enables a different kind of effort and perhaps more of an effort than that required to interpret the previous metaphor controlled by grammar.

Now we are better prepared to utilize the two prior inferences for an interpretation of face. Having noted that the title specifies

that the map is associated with love, we infer that the speaker is addressing his lover who not only knows the totality of the loved one but who also reflects for the loved one his (the loved one's) own experience. Also the clues slept and awake let us piece in more attributes for the love: the loved one is able to view his former and present life in fresh and vital ways. Again we experience a successive, "horizontal" movement through the fiction. Although slept preceeds awoke by only sixteen words, that distance is a long phenomenological timespan in a one sentence poem. All that has been pieced together thus far can be utilized to infer the special qualities intended by the focal clue face. When we metaphor face, we make a final hypothesis: our own perception of this rare love.

The preceiver bears the burden of sorting out clues for three inferences, collecting and relating this interlocking network to the resolving metaphor which specifies the special quality of the love. The clues for the resolving metaphor are so dense, so interdependent that the first metaphor, face . . . maps, has to be played again with all of its new and rich attributes so that it may interpret itself during the perceived resolution. Clues, then, point both to fictions and to more clues. The experienced perceiver accomplishes this complex activity with considerable simultaneity and not necessily in the sequence to which I (only one perceiver) have reduced them, but our clue tracking of "Love's Map" demonstrates that the astonishing complexity of the aesthetic text-perceiver-meaning

process can be explained and that these explanations promise methods for bringing individuals and literature together.

Interlinguistic tension is not a void; it makes possible an infinitely varied semiotic interplay between two codes: a perceptual ratio between language and its aesthetic use, a tensive balance between the primary system of language which has shaped our very thinking and the aesthetic system of language by which authors and speakers and perceivers can escape the poverty of the community's categories for thinking and labeling. Beyond the primary code we know there promises a fiction. But some would-be perceivers find that the fiction lies too far behind the information given. Those clues which designate what the perceiver must organize may require extrinsic knowledge and perceptual strategies the individual does not possess; whereas clues organized by the rules of the primary language system may be the best training ground for more strenuous work. Whatever our capacity, if we act upon what is given and what is not given in the clues of the aesthetic text, particularly if we speak our act, we can make a fiction out of the wealth of our uncoded experience.

Footnotes

[1] Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 151-156.

[2] Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood, tran. C. Gattegno and F.M. Hodgson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1962), p. 75.

[3] Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, Mental Imagery in the Child: A Study of the Development of Imaginal Representation (New York: Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 1971), p. 381.

[4] Wallace A. Bacon is responsible for the speech communication profession's recognition of the central function of tensiveness in language.

[5] Eco, p. 264.

[6] James M. Edie, Speaking and Meaning: The Phenomenology of Language (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 30-36.

[7] In The Summer Anniversaries (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, copyrights 1952-1960), p. 37.

[8] Eco., pp. 68-72.

[9] For the psycholinguistic explanation of this kind of metaphoring see Dorothy Mack Lambert, "The Semantic Syntax of Metaphor: A Case Grammar Analysis," Diss. University of Michigan 1969.